OP-ED

Strategic Success and Iraq's Three Conflicts

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Iraq's future is contingent on security. Neither economic growth nor the development of an open political system can take place in its absence. "Without order," Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld said in a recent speech to the Council on Foreign Relations "little else will be possible." But security remains elusive.

It is not hard to understand the reasons for this. Iraq is awash in arms and ammunition. Disproving the belief that armed citizenry is the best defense against tyranny, many Iraqis were armed before the downfall of the old regime, and many more have attained weapons since then. While the United States is actively rebuilding local police forces, they remain ineffective. Iraq has no military. And, in a broader sense, few ingrained constraints on aggression are present. Instead a plethora of grudges, desires, and enmities stoke violence. Only the thin presence of coalition forces prevents anarchy or civil war.

The coexistence of three separate sources of insecurity, conflict, and violence complicates matters. These are interlinked, but their solutions are at odds. One source of insecurity is the sectarian struggle for power and revenge among Sunni Arabs, Shiite Arabs, Kurds, and handful of minority groups. Added to this, tribal structures remain important in parts of Iraq. Some of these tribes were armed by the old regime as a means of co-optation. They are not taking kindly to an erosion of their power under the new national order.

The second source is organized crime. As Russia's transition from communism showed, underground organizations like criminal cartels are often the only ones with the experience, ruthlessness, and means to fill the power vacuum after the collapse of a totalitarian system. This may be happening in Iraq today. Already Iranian-based organized crime is active in Baghdad and elsewhere. And the criminal networks associated with the old regime still exist in some form. If this continues, Iraq may suffer Russia's fate as organized crime deters the development of open government and the foreign investment necessary for rapid economic growth.

The third source is nationalism, expressed as discontent with occupation by Western forces. This is coalescing and spreading more rapidly than expected as Iraqis become disillusioned by the lack of security and angered by the American presence. Already attacks on U.S. military forces and anti-U.S. demonstrations have become common.

The rub is that the solution to the first two sources of insecurity--a strong and sustained coalition occupation until indigenous security forces are effective--exacerbates the nationalistic violence. The solution to nationalistic violence--a speedy handoff to Iraqi security forces and withdrawal of coalition forces--risks leaving a government unable to confront sectarian conflict

and organized crime, perhaps internal war and national disintegration. This would be a disaster for the region and for U.S. interests.

Unfortunately, all this suggests that the United States and its coalition partners must sustain a high level of involvement in Iraq despite the likelihood of angering at least some segments of the Iraqi population and facing occasional attacks. Even though America does not wish to be an occupying power for more than a very short period of time, it must be, even if this requires heightened force protection.

The reason for this--and the paramount obstacle to the quick establishment of an orderly society ruled by Iraqis--is the psychology of survival in totalitarian systems. This is something that Americans have trouble understanding. One survives in a totalitarian system either by slavish loyalty to the regime or by passivity and dependence. The population depends on the regime for all public policy decisions, and for the provision of basic needs such as security, jobs, health care, and public utilities. When these are not forthcoming, the reaction tends to be anger and violence. One does not survive in a totalitarian system by negotiating or seeking compromise with the regime, or by organizing one's fellow citizens.

This totalitarian psychology is deeply ingrained in Iraqis. They expect the new regime--coalition forces, particularly Americans--to provide basic services. They become angry, sometimes violent when this does not happen. By the time basic services have reached the point of satisfying public demands, anger and violence may be institutionalized. Put bluntly, it will be many years before most Iraqis are thankful to the United States for liberating them.

These dilemmas have no easy solutions. It is clear, though, that sectarian violence or rampant organized crime can threaten America's ultimate strategic objective: a unified, stable and secure Iraq that does not threaten its neighbors. Nationalistic violence, while it endangers American forces, is less likely to do so. Better to pay the price of heightened force security measures and even casualties than to leave Iraq with strategic objectives unmet and the sacrifices of so many Americans in vain.

Iraq will not be ready for full, stable self-rule until the psychology of totalitarianism changes. The only way to engineer this and attain America's strategic objectives is through a bottom-up approach to Iraqi self-rule. Coalition forces should plan on national-level administration of Iraq and a significant military presence for at least two years while immediately and vigorously building local self-government. Through this, Iraqis can expunge themselves of the psychology of totalitarianism and learn the skills necessary for democracy.

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